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## **SEX-TYPING OF GENDER IDENTITY: A CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE TO K-POP IDOLS' PORTRAYALS OF PERCEIVED MASCULINITY**

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### ***Abstract<sup>1</sup>***

*This study<sup>2</sup> aims to investigate how individuals living in Turkey perceive masculinity through the external appearances of K-pop idols from a cultural perspective. A mixed-method approach was used for the research; qualitative and quantitative data were obtained. Initially, a survey was conducted to determine the participants' perspectives on gender roles. Lastly in-depth interviews were conducted with two different groups selected from the survey participants to evaluate K-pop idols from a masculinity perspective and to understand the reflections of media discourses on society. Using Sandra Lipsitz Bem's schema theory for determining gender roles, the participants' approaches to gender roles were comparatively evaluated. As a result, contrary to media discourse, it was understood that the participants were not disturbed by the way K-pop idols reflected masculinity and did not think that they were dangerous to society. It was revealed that familiarity with K-pop music did not significantly affect the perception of gender identity compared to those who were not familiar with it. However, although the participants stated that they adopted an egalitarian gender*

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approach, it was found that masculinity was evaluated within the framework of traditional roles.

**Keywords:** K-pop, Hallyu, Gender Roles, Masculinity, Identity.

## CİNSİYET KİMLİĞİNİN TİPLEŞTİRİLMESİ: K-POP İDOLLERİNİN ALGILANAN ERKEKLİK TASVİRLERİNE KÜLTÜREL BİR BAKIŞ

### Öz

Bu çalışma, Türkiye’de yaşayan bireylerin, erkekliği K-pop idollerinin dış görünüşleri aracılığıyla nasıl algıladıklarını kültürel bir perspektifle incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Araştırma için karma yöntem kullanılmış, nitel ve nicel veriler elde edilmiştir. Öncelikli olarak katılımcıların toplumsal cinsiyet rollerine yönelik bakış açılarının belirlenmesi amacıyla anket uygulanmıştır. Sonrasında ise K-pop idollerinin erkeklik bakış açısıyla değerlendirilmesi ve medya söylemlerinin toplum üzerindeki yansımalarının anlaşılması için anket katılımcıları içerisinde seçilen iki farklı grup ile derinlemesine görüşmeler gerçekleştirilmiştir. Sandra Lipsitz Bem’in toplumsal cinsiyet rollerinin belirlenmesi amacıyla geliştirdiği şema kuramından yararlanılarak, katılımcıların toplumsal cinsiyet rollerine ilişkin yaklaşımları karşılaştırmalı olarak değerlendirilmiştir. Sonuç olarak medya söylemlerinin aksine, K-pop idollerinin erkekliği yansıtmı biçiminden rahatsızlık duyulmadığı ve toplum için tehlikeli olduğunun düşünülmediği anlaşılmıştır. K-pop müziğe yönelik aşinalığın, aşına olmayanlara kıyasla cinsiyet kimliğini algılamada etkili olmadığı ortaya çıkmıştır. Bununla birlikte katılımcılar eşitlikçi cinsiyet yaklaşımını benimsediklerini ifade etseler de erkekliğin geleneksel roller çerçevesinde değerlendirildiği tespit edilmiştir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** K-pop, Hallyu, Toplumsal Cinsiyet, Erkeklik, Cinsiyet Kimliği.

### INTRODUCTION

Gender activities arise from and support claims of membership in a gender category (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Gender now includes not only physical differences but also roles in society. The distinction between feminine and masculine roles is highly significant and sharply defined within societies. An individual is either considered female or male, thus expected to exhibit behaviors attributed to their biological sex. Factors such as occupation, physical traits, and outward appearance influence individuals’ perception of gender identity (Kachel et al., 2016). In a sense, it is individuals who enact gender within society. Gender is seen not as an attribute of individuals but as a characteristic of societies. In this context, it is defined as “both a result and a legitimizing tool of various social arrangements, as well as one of the most fundamental distinctions of society” (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 127).

Gender roles are perceived as natural by individuals because they are a phenomenon shaped by the culture of societies. Many factors are cited as reasons why gender is defined as a cultural structure. These are based on the individual's upbringing, cultural norms, and ideas rather than focusing on their biological causes (Mascia-Lees & Black, 2016). For this reason, ideas about sex/gender were included in feminist research in the 1960s. By revitalizing the feminist movement, it aimed to distinguish these two concepts and to reveal the gender problem (Shapiro, 1981, p. 446). Feminist thinkers, who state that gender roles are shaped around patriarchal political thought, argue that the difference between men and women is small and that both genders have characteristics (Heywood, 2021).

Men and women shape their behavior and socialize according to the gender roles brought about by social roles shaped around culture. Since gender-appropriate behaviors are created by culture, these behaviors may vary from culture to culture and over time. Anthropology of gender and feminist anthropology studies have revealed contemporary gender identity approaches by examining the intersections of women, men, and cross-cultural gender. In the early stages of gender studies, research on women was conducted due to women's demand for a place in society, considering the conditions of the time. Gender studies, which began with a focus on singularity (Svendby, 2022), later incorporated research on men and masculinity.

K-pop, which has gained international popularity, has begun to form a fan base in Turkey. However, K-pop male idols are criticized in the Turkish media for not carrying traditional gender identities and creating an image different from the dominant portrayal of masculinity. The way the news media in Turkey represents K-pop male idols is of decisive importance in understanding their perception in society. In this context, the research is important in that it aims to reveal how the gender identities of K-pop boy groups are perceived and evaluated in a different culture, based on the news headlines in the media, and shows whether the news headlines in the media affect the mentality of the society. In this context, how individuals living in Turkey perceive the concept of masculinity through the appearance of K-pop members will be examined from a cultural perspective. It is aimed to contribute to the field by revealing the approaches of individuals living in Turkey regarding gender roles within the framework of the K-pop movement, which has recently influenced the whole world.

## **MASCULINITY STUDIES AND THE METAMORPHOSIS OF IDENTITY**

Herdt (1981), Kimmel (1987), Hearn (1993), Connell (1995) and Gutmann's (1996) research on gender identity, differences between gender-based behaviors, myth and culture make significant contributions to today's masculinity studies internationally. Research on men and masculinity studies, which were neglected in

anthropology, began to be carried out as a separate discipline in the 1980s. These studies often corresponded to the gender role theory of the male gender. Therefore, the man's role is uniform, stable, and normative behavior (Connell, 1995; Gutmann, 1996; Hearn, 1993; Herdt, 1981; Kimmel, 1987; Reeser, 2020).

The studies carried out on men in Turkey also started very late and the literature is quite limited even today. Studies on men in Türkiye, gender stereotypes shown in Turkish television commercials (Uray & Burnaz, 2003), the social construction of masculinity in Turkey (Sancar, 2011) and the role of the male gender in Turkish modernization (Sancar, 2014), hegemonic masculinity in Turkey (Özbay, 2013; Şimşek & Öner, 2015), the formation of the concept of fatherhood in Türkiye (Bozok, 2018), the areas where masculinity has undergone transformation in Turkey (Şahin, 2018), Young Turkish men's perspectives on the concept of masculinity (Tekkas Kerman & Betrus, 2019), contribute to the field every day.

On the other hand, Pleck provided a critical perspective on a series of ideological paradigms concerning gender roles, particularly the male role, shaped by culture since the 1930s. Pleck (1981) noted that he ultimately saw the male gender role paradigm as "ultimately a product of culture" and developed the alternative paradigm of gender role strain. According to the alternative paradigm, current male gender roles are contradictory and inconsistent; the proportion of individuals violating gender roles is high; violating gender roles leads to social condemnation and negative psychological consequences. Social roles imposed on men put pressure on them, causing them to experience various mental and physical health problems more often (Brod, 2018). It is important for men to be a part of gender discussions; studies show that (Bareket & Fiske, 2025; Rice et al., 2021; Moss-Racusin, 2014; Fleming et al., 2014) norms harm individuals.

Sandra Lipsitz Bem (1981), who evaluates femininity and masculinity as binary categories, developed the schema theory to determine gender roles. Schema theory is essentially defined as a constructive process in which perception is a product of the interaction between incoming information and the pre-existing schema or cognitive structure of the perceiver. The process by which society turns female and male into feminine and masculine is termed gender typing. From a young age, individuals construct their codes based on the culture of the society in which they are raised and tend to behave according to these codes. In the early stages of this coding process, children gradually learn the content of the gender schema accepted by society and begin to make sense of the qualities of their biological sex. Even if judgments about the characteristics that genders should possess, such as men being strong and women being weak, are not verbally expressed, they are conveyed and encoded by society. By observing adults, children see their behavior as correct and make a mental note of it. Applying similar schematic selectivity to themselves, children learn to select only those subgroups defined as appropriate to their gender and within which they can organize themselves, despite the countless dimensions of human personality they may have. Thus, while self-concepts become gender-based,

genders are positioned differently not only in degree but also in kind (Bem, 1981). As a result, the gender schema is created by the current cultural practices and can be considered as a standard guide that regulates the behavior of individuals in society.

For a long time, behaviors of women and men have been attempted to be explained by associating them with gender differences. However, globalization, popular culture, and the emerging postmodern thought have shown that there could be different approaches to traditional gender identities (Chodorow, 2005). With postmodernism, the idea that the behaviors exhibited by individuals determine who they are has come to the fore. This idea moves femininity and masculinity away from a binary categorization and brings them closer to a field outside the artificial behavioral patterns created according to the biological sex of the individual (Cameron, 1997). Postmodern gender approaches focus on differences between individuals. It advocates a multi-gender structure that assumes that numerous identities can be created in society by criticizing the perception of binary gender identity (Kara, 2012).

Postmodernism, which Lyotard (1984), defines as disbelief in meta-narratives, essentially brings a critical consciousness by questioning traditional concepts and rejecting the taught social rules. According to Lyotard (1984), narrative information such as freedom, pleasure and happiness have lost their power in the postmodern period societies. Therefore, within the social transformations created by popular culture, differentiation in the perception and construction of gender identities comes with it. In the postmodern societies of the 21st century, identities beyond the culturally accepted binary gender identity have begun to gain visibility (Thorne et al., 2019). In today's world, the transformation in gender identities is carried to different societies through media. Digital and traditional media tools accelerate the structural transformation of perceived identities and make them more visible on a global scale (Hammack & Manago, 2024). In this way, individuals become able to separate themselves from the behavioral characteristics of their biological identities naturally presented by society.

## **K-POP IN POPULAR CULTURE**

Popular culture encompasses a broad array of cultural expressions—from music and television to social media. It is not just a reflection of societal norms but also an active agent in their construction and transformation. As Arisoy (2016, p. 133) observes,

“Culture is defined as all sorts of learned and internalized human behaviour manners. In some cases, a culture might be suppressed by other cultures which are more popular than the previous one. Popular culture consists of arts, food and beverage, etiquettes and even ethics. These features of the popular culture penetrate to other cultures, therefore local ones get weaker.”

This perspective underscores the dynamic and sometimes hegemonic role that popular culture can play in shaping identity and social values. Gender identity is a socially and culturally constructed concept that is continuously produced, consumed, and represented within popular culture. Media, as a central component of popular culture, shapes and reinforces societal perceptions of masculinity and femininity, which are internalized and adopted as behavioral norms. Popular culture perpetuates dominant masculine norms, imposing rigid gender roles and expectations on men, who are expected to conform to and uphold these socially constructed stereotypes (Tiwari, 2019). Horkheimer and Adorno (2002) critiqued mass culture in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, arguing that cultural products are commodified and serve to reinforce dominant ideologies. Although their analysis emerged in the context of mid-20th century industrial society, it remains a useful starting point for questioning the production and consumption of global cultural phenomena like K-pop.

In the phenomenon of popular culture, viral trends that have dominated television screens and social media over the past decade can be observed within K-pop culture. Korean popular culture is a carefully crafted and widely recognized phenomenon. Elements such as performing arts, music, theatre, and film have been integrated with global cultural influences and Korean cultural identity, collectively shaping the distinct aesthetic of K-pop. The industrialization of the entertainment sector has further enhanced the global popularity of Korean culture (Jayanti et al., 2022). Hall's encoding/decoding model (1980) is especially important to understand K-pop studies. Hall suggests that media producers "encode" texts with cultural meanings, which are then "decoded" by audiences based on their own social and cultural contexts. This model helps explain why a single K-pop video such as, BTS's "IDOL" might have multiple interpretations depending on whether the audience is domestic, international, or influenced by different gender norms.

Postmodern theories further emphasize that identities are fluid and continually reshaped through cultural texts. Scholars like Lie (2015) argue that K-pop's global rise is partly due to its ability to challenge traditional narratives by blending local cultural symbols with transnational influences. In this sense, Lie (2015, p. 157) suggests that: "The obvious humour of Gangnam Style, its cheekiness and even its cheesiness, merely add to the charm of Psy, the scrutable Other". Moreover, Williams (1983), and Fiske (1987) add to this discussion by emphasizing how cultural forms both reflect and contest social structures, including those related to gender. K-pop's evolution from a local trend to a global force is marked by its high production quality, innovative choreography, and stylistic nature. For example, BTS's music video for "IDOL" integrates traditional Korean art and symbolism with contemporary pop visuals. This blend of cultural references challenges established norms of authenticity and modernity while promoting a hybrid aesthetic.

Jin (2016) notes that such cultural combinations are central to K-pop's appeal, as they disrupt conventional divides between the local and the global. As Jin

cites (2016, p. 64) “Korean culture is popular overseas, because it is transnational and hybrid and involve[s] combinations of local and foreign elements at multiple levels.” Moreover, K-pop offers a ground for exploring how popular culture can transform gender identity. For instance, male idols are on a complex area where masculine manners are blended with softer, more androgynous features. In BTS’s “Blood, Sweat & Tears,” the choreography and styling blur rigid gender boundaries, illustrating that strength and vulnerability are not mutually exclusive. This hybrid form of masculinity challenges traditional gender binaries, reminding Hall’s emphasis on multiple layers of meaning in cultural texts.

To conclude, popular culture and K-pop in particular serves as a dynamic arena where gender identities are constructed, contested, and reimagined. The interplay between high-production aesthetics, hybrid cultural symbols, active audience participation especially through social media, creates a multidimensional and complex landscape for gender expression. Real-world examples such as BTS supported by theoretical insights from Adorno and Horkheimer, Hall, Lie, and others, demonstrate how K-pop disrupts traditional gender binaries. As K-pop continues to evolve and capture global attention, its influence on the discourse surrounding gender identity promises to offer new insights into the intersection of culture, media, and social transformation.

### **BEYOND BOUNDARIES: K-POP AND GENDER IDENTITY**

South Korea has started popular culture export activities called Korean Wave (Hallyu) to increase its international awareness and change its ethnic image. Hallyu, in short, covers the creation and consumption of Korean drama (K-drama), Korean pop music (K-pop), Korean cinema and Korean stars in the global market with a certain fan base (Binark, 2019). Although Hollywood and American culture are at the center of the culture industry, Hallyu provides great financial gains on a global scale (Oh, 2009).

For instance, BTS, the first Korean music group to be nominated for a Grammy, provides an economic contribution of 5 billion dollars to its country annually and attracts more than 800 thousand tourists to South Korea (Smith, 2021). Considering the economic contributions they provide, K-pop groups become both one of the important investments for South Korea and the face of the country reflected in the global arena. For this reason, the government created cultural policies and had entertainment companies provide various training for young singer candidates from an early age and ensured that idols were created (Vargas Meza & Park, 2015). However (Kim, 2017), states that the creation process of the K-pop groups in question is a hybrid commodity production of East and West, stylized not only in a cultural sense but also for profit, appealing to global consumers. K-pop

idols are positioned as objects of display that appeal to every consumer with their stage performances, costumes, and physical attractiveness (Leung, 2012).

In terms of gender identities, which are the focus of this study, in Asian societies, the androgynous appearance of K-pop male idols does not give individuals feminine identities and is not associated with homosexuality as in Western societies. Asians describe having a beautiful and well-groomed appearance as masculine attractiveness. In South Korea, which attaches importance to appearance and physical attractiveness, it is an accepted behavior for men to add make-up to their daily routine. Named as the “Flower Boy,” this phenomenon reflects the perception that men with feminine characteristics are perceived as more attractive and deserving of prominence in popular culture (Globalist, 2007). Considering South Korea’s long-standing cultural structure, the accepted ideal male image has traditionally been one of strength, toughness, and dominance. However, with the spread of digital culture, it has been observed that gender identities have been rapidly changing for some time. Asian men are increasingly rejecting the gender behaviors imposed on them and embracing the notion that looking good is not exclusive to women.

**Figure 1: K-pop Group BTS**



**Figure 2: K-pop Group Stray Kids & TXT**



While spreading Korean culture to various parts of the world, K-pop boy groups are also reshaping gender norms on a global scale. K-pop, offering a synthesis



of both Eastern and Western cultures, stands at a hybrid point in terms of identity development. Given that most global K-pop fans are women, it is observed that K-pop male idols' identities reflect a departure from binary gender norms (Oh, 2015; Fuhr, 2016). While fundamentally creating a heteronormative identity, queer images are showcased. Male idols, who mostly have a slim body structure and a cute face, prefer sparkly clothes, wear make-up, and act physically affectionate towards other male idols (Kuo et al., 2022). K-pop male idols, who reconstruct male gender identity in a versatile way, create an ideal male profile that has both masculine and feminine characteristics and can appeal to everyone, which fans cannot have in their own countries (Oh, 2015). K-pop boy groups' gender identities are described by Jung (2011), "multifaceted masculinity", Jung (2013) "transnational masculinity"; Oh (2015), "alternative masculinity"; Anderson (2014) defined it as "overlapping masculinity" (Song & Velding, 2020, p. 5). In this context, an androgynous identity structure can be observed in K-pop male idols, as they incorporate feminine characteristics into traditionally masculine behaviors. This is exemplified by practices such as the use of cosmetic products and the selection of pastel-toned clothing.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

Various criticisms have been brought to K-pop groups, which have a significant fan base in Turkey and whose numbers are increasing day by day, in the Turkish media. Especially due to their failure to exhibit traditional gender behaviors, more than 20 news headlines such as "The 'K-Pop threat' spreading from the Far East" (Paksoy, 2019), "Children are innocent, danger is big" (Akbaş, 2019), "The great danger dragging young people into genderlessness: K-Pop!" (Sabah, 2021), and "What is K-Pop, why is it so dangerous? Experts warn..." (Dengiz, 2022) have appeared in mainstream media. It is stated in the content of the news that the images and lifestyles of K-pop boy groups have a negative impact on young people and create the perception of genderlessness. It has been stated that K-pop should be banned because it is thought to negatively affect young people and pose a danger to society.

When we look at the news headlines and contents of the mainstream media, it is seen that opposition to K-pop is created based on men's body perception. Keskin and Binark (Keskin & Binark, 2021) state that the reason why individuals with androgynous identity structures are marginalized by society is a threat to perceived hegemonic masculine roles and the fear that feminine images will foster homosexuality and queer identities. In this regard, it is thought that the fact that K-pop male idols do not comply with the traditional gender identities adopted by society results in the inappropriate transfer of identities other than binary gender roles. In the continuation of their research, Keskin and Binark stated that the feminized body images of male individuals are labeled as immoral by the media

industry because they contradict traditional cultural norms, thus trying to create moral panic in society.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

This research follows Song and Velding's (Song & Velding, 2020) study and examines individuals' perceptions of K-pop masculinity at the local level. Based on the news headlines in the media, it aims to reveal how the gender identities of K-pop boy groups are perceived and evaluated in different cultures. The study is important in terms of showing whether news headlines in the media affect the mentality of the society. For this reason, the first question of the research was determined as

Q1: Do the discourses in the media negatively affect individuals' opinions towards K-pop boy music bands? The study also examines whether familiarity with the K-pop music genre has any effect on the perception of gender identity. Therefore, the second question of the research is

Q2: Do the approaches to gender identities of individuals who listen to K-pop differ compared to those who do not?

At this point, Bem's gender schema theory is taken as the theoretical basis. According to this theory, individuals have various schemes in their minds and any new information they encounter is organized according to the existing schemes. Information that does not comply with the schemas shaped by culture is often not accepted by the individual or is distorted.

When we look at Turkey's gender schema, although traditional gender roles are active, femininity and masculinity are evaluated as a binary category. In Turkey, an individual's behavior is regulated according to his/her biological gender since childhood. The individual reaches manhood by going through various stages to be accepted in society and gain authority. The child begins to internalize the male behavioral codes determined by society by taking his father and those of his own gender as role models. In this regard, men are excluded by others if they do not have the values in question (Barutçu, 2013). Considering the patriarchal structure of Turkey; it is seen that it is in line with Bem's (1981) gender schema theory that the schemas shaped by culture form a framework for determining gender roles. At this point, the research tests whether the way male K-pop idols reflect masculinity is consistent with the participant's perception of gender roles prevalent in Turkey. Thus, the third and last question of the research is

Q3: Does the cultural structure of the country affect the individuals' gender roles?

## **SAMPLING**

To obtain research data, the Gender Roles Attitude Scale was initially administered to 412 individuals aged 18-40 residing in Istanbul using a simple random sampling method. For the pilot study, data were collected from 207 participants in November-December 2022 and from 205 participants in October-November 2023. At the end of the survey, participants were asked to indicate their familiarity with the K-pop music genre and to share their e-mail addresses if they wanted to participate in the second part of the research. This research necessitated ethical approval due to its inclusion of human subjects. Accordingly, an application was submitted to the relevant ethics committee, resulting in ethical approval decision number 08 for the pilot study and 07 for the main study. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their involvement in the survey and in-depth interviews. The survey data, which included sensitive personal information such as participants' email addresses, were securely stored on the researchers' personal computers. An in-depth interview using qualitative research methods was conducted in two different groups with 16 people selected by systematic sampling from the participants who shared their e-mail addresses. The groups were created in two different types, depending on whether the participants were familiar or not familiar with the K-pop music genre, and how the gender identities of K-pop male idols were perceived were comparatively revealed. The survey mainly covers questions regarding the position of women in society. In-depth interview questions contain elements about masculinity. At the end of the research, the participants' perspectives towards both genders were compared.

## **MEASUREMENTS**

For the survey questions, Bem's "Bem Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI)", which forms the theoretical basis of the study, was first considered. However, when the literature was examined, it was seen that the form of the scale adapted to Turkey was controversial (Dökmen, 1999). For this reason, The Gender Roles Attitude Scale (GRAS) developed by Zeyneloğlu (Zeyneloğlu, 2008) was used. The scale is a five-point Likert type with the options "strongly disagree, disagree, undecided, agree, completely agree". The highest score that participants can get from the scale is 190 and the lowest score is 38. Participants with the highest scores from the scale are considered to have egalitarian attitudes in gender roles, while participants with the lowest scores are considered to have traditional attitudes. Egalitarian role means that women share responsibilities equally with men in family, marriage, education, professional and social life. While the traditional role is determined by the male-dominated system, the positions of masculinity and femininity are also kept under control. Individuals in society are expected to adopt female-feminine and male-

masculine roles and exhibit behaviors appropriate to their gender identities (Gülseven, 2017). A 15-item interview form was created for the second part of the research. For 8 items of the interview form, the questions in Song and Velding's (Song & Velding, 2020) study were used. Research data were recorded and collected face-to-face and online through the Zoom application, with the knowledge and consent of the participants. Each interview lasted approximately 15 minutes and was conducted in daily spoken language. Mixed method was used for the research and qualitative and quantitative data were obtained. Quantitative data were analyzed with the SPSS 24 statistical program, and qualitative data were analyzed with the MAXQDA 24 package program.

## DATA ANALYSIS

### Findings Regarding Quantitative Data

A new study was conducted by Zeyneloğlu and Terzioğlu (Zeyneloğlu & Terzioğlu, 2011) to develop the scale. Statistically significant differences were determined between the items of the scale, which consists of 38 items and 5 dimensions ( $p < 0.01$ ), and the total Cronbach's alpha internal consistency coefficient was found to be 0.92. It has been understood that the scale items are valid and reliable tools in determining participants' attitudes towards gender roles.

In the research, primarily a pilot study was conducted a survey was administered to 207 participants in order to determine the attitudes of participants between the ages of 18-40 residing in Istanbul, regarding gender roles. Afterwards, the study continued and a total of 412 participants were reached.

**Table 1:** Sample Descriptive Statistics (N = 412).

		N	%
Sex	Female	272	66
	Male	140	34
	Gender Not Specified	-	-
Age	18-20	54	13.1
	21-25	104	25.2
	26-30	93	22.6
	31-35	76	18.4
	36-40	85	20.6
Marital Status	Married	121	29.4
	Single	291	70.6

<b>Education Level</b>	Primary Education	-	-
	High school	28	6.8
	University	274	66.5
	Postgraduate	110	26.7
<b>Job</b>	Student	114	27.7
	Public Sector Employee	50	12.1
	Private Sector Employee	218	52.9
	Not Working	30	7.3
<b>Familiarity with Korean Pop</b>	Yes	88	21.4
	No	324	78.6
<b>Total:</b>		<b>412</b>	<b>100</b>

The “Household Monthly Income” item from the scale was removed due to the unpredictability of the inflation difference that occurred during the study. When the table is examined, it is seen that most of the participants are educated single women between the ages of 21-25. Although the K-pop music genre does not discriminate against gender, its fan groups generally consist of female listeners. Considering the global recognition of K-pop; it is understood that most participants do not have the knowledge of the music genre in question. The fact that the participants are not familiar with the music genre reveals that K-pop is not yet fully known by middle-aged people living in Istanbul.

Firstly, the results of the GRAS applied to the participants were evaluated. Thus, it was tried to understand how the participants perceived gender roles and to what extent they adopted general norms.

**Table 2:** Sample Attitudes Towards Gender Roles.

Sub-Dimensions of the Scale	Mean	Median	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Egalitarian Gender Role	38,2	40	3,32	8	40
Female Gender Role	34,8	36	5,84	13	40
Gender Role in Marriage	37,7	39	3,31	17	40
Traditional Gender Role	33,6	35	6,84	8	40
Male Gender Role	27,1	28	3,91	11	30
			<b>Total:</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>190</b>

Table 2 shows the distribution of the scores the participants received from the sub-dimensions of the GRAS. It was determined that the participants received a minimum of 57 points and a maximum of 190 points from the scale. The maximum score that can be obtained from the scale is 190, and this value shows that the participants have an egalitarian attitude toward gender roles. Considering Turkey's cultural values; it is known that it has a traditional and patriarchal social structure. However, it is noteworthy that the participants adopted the egalitarian gender role, which is the belief that women and men should have equal rights in society. The greater adoption of egalitarian roles may be attributable to the participant sample being predominantly female. Egalitarian gender roles posit the principle that individuals, irrespective of their gender, should possess equitable access to rights and opportunities in all domains and be subject to treatment consistent with the same principles, norms, and standards (Walby, 2005). In the next part of the research, the participants' answers to the interview questions will be evaluated together with their attitudes towards gender roles.

### **Findings Regarding Qualitative Data**

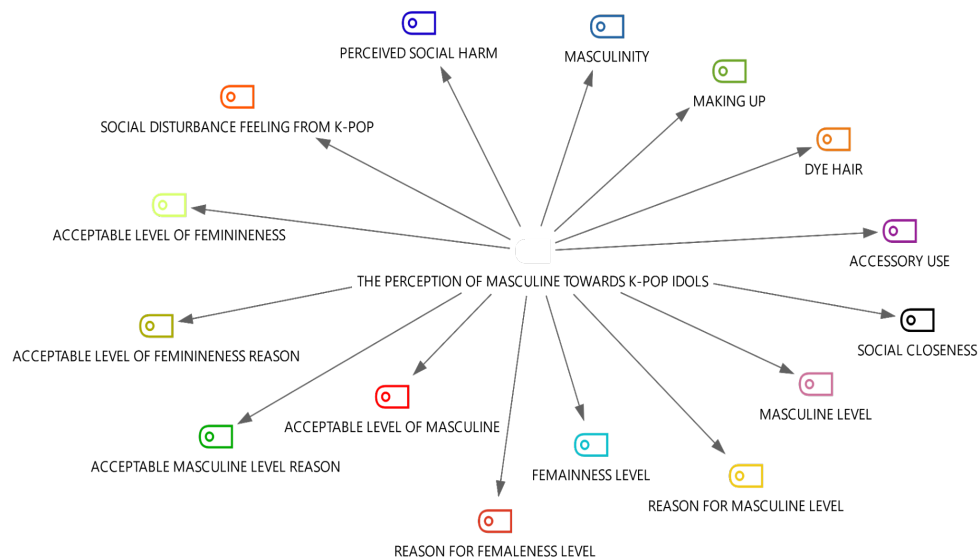
In the second part of the research, qualitative data obtained through in-depth interview technique were examined, interpreted, and visualized with the MAXQDA program. Direct quotes from the participants are included to support the findings. The first 5 questions measure the participants' perceptions on masculinity. Questions 6-15 are aimed at understanding how participants evaluate the portrayal of masculinity reflected by male K-pop idols. Participants were divided into two separate groups of 8 people: familiar with K-pop and unfamiliar with K-pop.<sup>3</sup>

The interviews were held between with a total of 16 people, 10 women and 6 men, between the ages of 24 and 39. It is understood that the in-depth interview participants were on average 30 years old, had middle income, and had a postgraduate education level. The interview questions of the research cover how individuals perceive masculinity, attitudes towards gender roles, and how the gender identities of K-pop idols are defined, based on news headlines published in the mainstream media. In this regard, 15 themes were determined by the researchers, and 101 sub-themes emerged in line with the participants' responses.

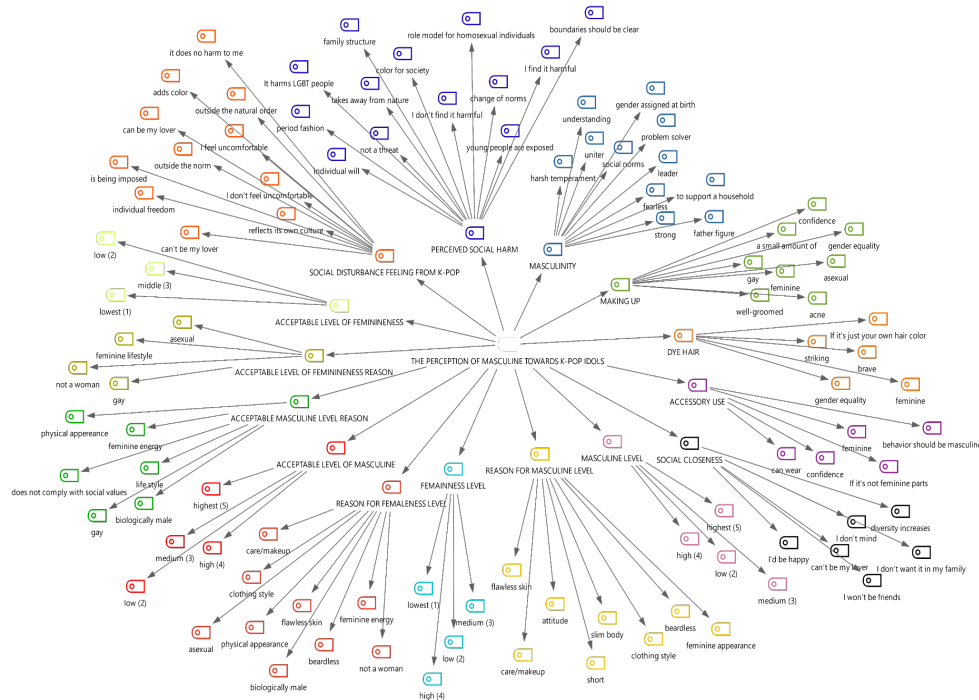
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<sup>3</sup> To ensure confidentiality, the names of the participants were coded by the researchers from KPA1 to KPA8 and from KPAD1 to KPAD8. The encodings were created considering the participants' familiarity with K-pop. Participants who were familiar with K-pop were identified as KPA1 - KPA8, and participants who were not familiar with K-pop were identified as KPAD1 - KPAD8.

**Figure 3:** Themes Relating to the Perception of Masculinity towards K-Pop Idols.



**Figure 4:** Sub-Themes Related to the Perception of Masculinity Towards K-Pop Idols.



## Defining masculinity

In the theme of masculinity, participants were asked “how do you define masculinity?”. This question was posed regarding how the male gender role is perceived. Half of the participants who are familiar with the K-pop music genre stated that they see masculinity as an individual assigned to a gender and social behavior patterns assigned at birth depending on the reproductive organ, while the other half responded as a dominant character, macho and the opposite of a woman. Participants who were not familiar with the K-pop music genre similarly evaluated masculinity through traditional gender stereotypes that were ascribed norms by society, with the expressions of being physically and emotionally strong, earning money, being the pillar of the house, being a leader and being a father. Considering that the participants have an egalitarian social attitude, the roles assigned to men are mostly traditional and patriarchal. “The father in the family, the authority of the house. If there is no father, the son takes his place and the role of managing the family will remain with the eldest child (KPAD7)”. It is noteworthy that the last participant evaluated masculinity in a monarchical structure passed from father to son. In this regard, in accordance with Bem’s gender schema, although the participants say that they attribute equal roles to men and women, they differentiate masculine roles from women in the schemas they create in their minds and position



them as being in control, powerful and managerial.

On the theme of make-up, participants were asked “how do you evaluate if a man is wearing make-up?”. Participants who are familiar with the K-pop music genre mostly stated that men can wear make-up just like women and that it shows a well-groomed appearance. However, half of the participants also underlined that despite their positive perspective towards make-up, cosmetics are perceived as something feminine. “At first, I find it strange, but then I think it does not concern me. Make-up gives feminine features to a man (KPA4)”.

On the other hand, two results were obtained for participants who were not familiar with the K-pop music genre. The first of these is that men can only use cosmetic products when necessary. Participants think that cosmetic products like skin colour can be used to cover skin imperfections such as dark circles or acne; however, he does not find it appropriate to use anything other than these because they are perceived as feminine. “Unless it is obvious, it is not a problem. If it is noticeable, then I would categorize that person, indicating that their inclination towards the same sex is stronger. If a man is wearing lipstick, it means his feminine hormones are dominant, but of course, if a man gets a pimple, he may want to cover it up with concealer (KPAD1)”.

The second answer is that cosmetic products should never be used by men, whether they have acne or not. In this context, it has been determined that cosmetic care is seen as a practice for women. “I don't find it reasonable; I'm not very keen on the idea of a man doing makeup visually. He can apply sunscreen, use moisturizer, but the idea of makeup is off-putting to me (KPAD8)”.

The answers generally show that men should not use colored cosmetics, and if they do, their sexual orientation is thought to be different. Considering this view and Bem's theory, it can be inferred that masculinity is perceived as different from women in the mental schema and that any behavior coded as feminine reduces the masculinity.

On the theme of hair dye, participants were asked how you would rate a man dyeing his hair?” Both groups stated that this could be done by citing gender equality. “I don't find it strange; I don't think it's something feminine (KPAD4)”. In this regard, the fact that hair dyeing, which can be assumed as personal care, is not considered as feminine a practice as applying make-up, reveals the reason for this answer.

“Men can dye their hair because we are used to it from football players (KPAD6)”. It is seen that football, which is more common and perceived as a masculine sport in traditional societies, is also perceived as masculine in its players. For this reason, the fact that football players dye their hair has over time made the act of hair dyeing available to men as well as women, making it independent of

gender. Therefore, the masculine image of male football players is reflected in the act of hair dyeing, making it no longer a feminine feature.

Regarding the theme of accessories, participants were asked, “how do you evaluate a man using accessories and bags?” Participants familiar with the K-pop music genre stated that people assign genders to materials, and therefore, men can use any accessory they want. The majority of participants who are not familiar with the K-pop music genre expressed that accessories could be used if they are not feminine pieces. “Only a ring would be acceptable. It seems culturally normal. A watch could also be acceptable, but other than that, they seem feminine (KPAD3)”. Participants emphasized again that objects attributed to women within a non-egalitarian attitude would not be suitable for men's use, and those men who use them must have dominant feminine hormones.

The social closeness theme was created to determine participants' attitudes and social acceptance towards individuals exhibiting the characteristics (makeup, hair dye, accessories) mentioned in the last three questions. In this context, the question “how does it affect you to have someone around who exhibits these traits?” was asked. In both groups, participants stated that such a thing is not a problem, and it could even be beneficial in terms of providing diversity. “Different people and different types of relationships attract people's attention because we do not see them often around us (KPA4)”. However, participants' perception of male individuals with these traits as diversity reveals that they see them as a different third category outside of the traditional binary gender of male and female.

Especially female participants stated that they would not prefer to have an emotional relationship with a man who has these elements. Male participants emphasized that such male roles are not desired in male-to-male social environments.

In short, while the participants say that they see and accept the individuals around them with these characteristics as diversity, it turns out that social acceptance is not actually internalized. Therefore, although it is thought that the participants, whose mental schemas are formed according to traditional and patriarchal cultural codes in Turkey, have an egalitarian understanding of gender, it is understood that this understanding is not fully adopted, and there are schemas containing the traditional roles of men and women in the lower layers of the mind.

### **A look at K-pop male idols**

In the next part of the study, participants were shown photos of male K-pop idols BTS, Stray Kids and Seventeen and were asked to answer questions based on

these images.<sup>4</sup> In the theme of masculinity level, the participants were asked “how would you rate the general masculinity levels between 1-5 points, based on the visuals of the groups?”. 1 represents the lowest level of masculinity and 5 indicates the highest level of masculinity. Both groups gave 2 and 3 points to the masculinity level of mostly male K-pop idols, rating the perception of the groups’ masculinity from neutral to feminine. Participants’ predominantly feminine-leaning neutral understanding is due to K-pop male idols not conforming to Turkey’s societal gender schema. The presentation of male images to participants with clothing styles and accessories labeled as feminine resulted in no definitive judgment on how their genders were perceived. The depiction of K-pop male idols as gender-neutral in Turkish news media supports participants’ neutral responses to perceptions of masculinity.

When the participants were asked “why they gave this score to the level of masculinity”, the participants stated that the male images had a thin body, no beard, flawless skin appearance, clothing style, colored hair, well-groomed/make-up, posture, and poses were not considered masculine enough. “The Asian community is generally not of a masculine type. They are not muscular; they look feminine. None of them have beards, and they are not tall or robust (KPAD1)”.

On the theme of femininity level, the participants were asked “how would you rate their general femininity level between 1-5 points, based on the visuals of the groups?” to determine how feminine male K-pop idols are perceived as. The answers given by the participants of both groups indicate an average level of femininity, between 1 and 3 points. In this case, it turns out that male K-pop groups have fewer masculine characteristics, but this does not indicate the individuals as women.

They were asked “why they gave this score to the level of femininity”. The reason was given as the fact that they are biologically male and do not look like women. “I can’t say they’re women because they don’t appear to be so. But I also can’t say they’re not women because they use items associated with women's fashion (KPA1)”. Although they have a low-masculine appearance, it has been stated that it would not be appropriate for them to be perceived as women because they are biologically male.

After determining the extent to which participants perceive male K-pop idols as male and female, the level of acceptable masculinity was assessed. Participants

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<sup>4</sup> The groups were selected from the idols that ranked in the top 5 of the lists of the most listened to K-pop groups worldwide published by Spotify for the year 2022. Photos taken from stage performances or magazine shoots include idols with accessories, colorful clothes and intimate poses.

were asked to evaluate on a scale of 1-5 how acceptable the overall masculinity levels of the groups are based on their images. Participants from both groups provided responses ranging from 3 to 5 points, indicating that the perceived masculinity levels were higher. Even though participants found the masculinity levels of K-pop male idols to be low, they still acknowledge them as male.

They were asked “why they gave this answer to the acceptable level of masculinity”. Participants stated that these people were men, that they looked like men, and that having feminine parts did not make them women. For this reason, they accept them as men. “They are men, that’s not the issue, but their lifestyle isn’t masculine. Their appearance and lifestyle don’t fit our definitions of masculinity, our values, and our society. I don’t think they fit into Korean society either (KPAD6)”.

It has been stated that both according to Bem’s theory and traditional theories of gender, the perception of gender identity is shaped and accepted based on the influence of the current culture in the society one lives in. At the same time, it was stated by the participants that the idols contradict Korea’s gender identity norms, since the cultural norms of South Korea follow a similar line with Turkey.

In the theme of acceptable femininity, the participants were asked “how would you rate, between 1-5 points, how acceptable the general femininity levels are based on the visuals of the groups?” to determine the acceptability of the femininity levels of K-pop male idols. In this regard, participants of both groups evaluated the level of perceived femininity on a scale between 1 and 3 points, from neutral to low.

Then they were asked “why they gave this score to the acceptable level of femininity”. Like the previous answers, it was stated that these people are biologically male, they do not look like women, feminine accessories do not play a determining role in gender perception, and therefore they are perceived and accepted as men. “I don’t see them as women, they are not in the general male type we are used to in society, but I can’t say they are women either (KPA4)”.

### **Media discourses**

On the theme of social discomfort with K-pop, to evaluate the way male K-pop groups are featured in the Turkish media; the participants were asked: “How do you evaluate the way K-pop male groups are reflected in the media? Do you feel uncomfortable with this way of being reflected?” Most of both groups stated that they did not feel uncomfortable. “They are all referred to as very famous male groups. Their masculinity is accepted. They show that men can be beyond the norm (KPA1)”.

It has been noted that due to South Korea’s beauty standards, everyone is expected to look perfect. However, only one participant from each group expressed discomfort with the way masculinity is portrayed.

Regarding the perceived societal harm theme, participants were asked the question, “what impact might the portrayal of K-pop male groups in the media have on society? Do you find this portrayal harmful to society?” to determine the acceptance of statements made in the Turkish media regarding the negative influence and harm of K-pop male groups on young people. In this regard, like the previous answers, none of the participants except KPA2 and KPAD3 stated that, they did not find it harmful or encouraging. “You cannot force someone to accept something if they do not have a predisposition for it. You cannot force it upon me either. They watch, listen, and observe, but if there is truly such a predisposition within their souls, they can see it within themselves. Otherwise, no one can force anything on anyone (KPA2)”; “I do not find it harmful; I do not believe it is something one can do just by imitating others (KPAD4)”. Participants stated that K-pop does not have a structural transformation on gender identity and does not pose a harm to society.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

In this study, based on Bem’s gender schema theory, it was tried to determine how individuals evaluate gender roles in different cultures in the light of the schemas created by the existing cultural structure in Turkey. In this context, the criticisms frequently made in the Turkish media on the gender of South Korean male music groups constitute the starting point of the study.

A survey was conducted to determine participants’ attitudes towards gender roles. The results of the survey indicate that all participants adhere to highly egalitarian gender roles. The predominance of female participants may have influenced the observed support for egalitarian roles, which is acknowledged as a limitation of the study. Egalitarian roles, view women and men as equals in society, unlike traditional roles, and do not place individuals within specific behavioral patterns. The report prepared by Kızıllırmak et al. (2022) for the years 2000-2019 shows that Turkey’s Gender Development Index is below the average of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries. In particular, gender inequality in income, employment, political representation, and education continues to be a significant issue. As of 2024, Turkey remains among the lowest-ranking countries in terms of closing the gender inequality gap (Pal et al., 2024). Based on the responses provided by the participants, their adherence to egalitarian gender roles and the gender schema theory were evaluated. Despite participants having egalitarian gender attitudes, it is observed that they still endorse the traditional perspective that perceives men as strong, dominant, and authoritative, placing them above women in society. In this regard, in line with Bem’s gender schema theory, it can be concluded that Turkey’s existing patriarchal and traditional societal structure shapes individuals’ schemas, leading to the internal acceptance of binary gender roles (Q3).

It is understood that using accessories, cosmetics, and grooming products labeled as feminine is not deemed acceptable for masculinity to be accepted by society. This attitude reinforces traditional gender roles, leading to men appearing less masculine in society or giving the impression that they are attracted to their own gender. Men who are perceived as less masculine in social life tend to adhere to masculine roles to avoid being excluded by both their peers and the opposite gender. Individuals with these characteristics are seen as diversity by society. Although this approach may be perceived optimistically, it indicates that individuals are positioned differently in social life at a subconscious level. This is because they are labeled differently from traditional binary gender behaviors, and men of this type are marginalized for not conforming to gender schemas.

Gender roles are adopted not only by men but also by women in society. Women, just like men, pay attention to these characteristics when choosing a partner because they think that the appearance defined as feminine brings men closer to women in terms of gender. While men are not disturbed by the presence of individuals with these characteristics in society, on the other hand, they do not want them in friendship relations. Apart from this, it is not preferred for individuals within the family to have these characteristics, which are considered as a weakness and an element of criticism. In this case, while behaviors in line with Turkey's gender schema emerge, seeing the use of women's phenomenons (feminine phenomena) by men as a degrading situation does not comply with egalitarian gender roles.

The fact that K-pop male idols, who are thought to have an androgynous gender identity, do not comply with the current patriarchal gender roles in Turkey is often featured in the media as corrupting society, setting a bad example, and suggesting that families should be careful to keep young people away. It was understood that the participants were not disturbed by the way K-pop idols reflected masculinity and were not considered dangerous to society, contrary to the discourse in the mainstream Turkish media (Q1).

In a society where traditional gender roles dominate, it is thought that gender identity will not change depending on other factors and is an individual choice, in line with the egalitarian role. For this reason, K-pop music is not seen as harmful to society as stated in the media. K-pop male idols are not the sole representation of a gender, nor do they have the power to direct individuals to engage in a certain gender behavior. These people are considered pop artists and the stage, costume, and show, which are a part of their work, are considered as a whole. Although there is no discomfort with the way K-pop idols reflect masculinity, the gender identity in question is not considered normal and is marginalized. The participants' approaches to gender identities did not differ whether they were familiar with Korean culture and K-pop music genre or not (Q2).

K-pop male idols are considered male because they have an innate biological sex. Idols with androgynous characteristics were considered genderless because they were thought to represent both male and female binary behavioral patterns in the

traditional sense. This situation reveals that, in line with Bem's gender schema theory, traditional male and female dual roles are adopted in Turkey and gender identities are thought to be formed within the framework of these roles. Group members who do not carry patriarchal behavioral codes due to their clothing style, stance and behavior are perceived as more feminine but are accepted as men due to their biological sex. This approach also contradicts egalitarian gender roles. As a result, in Turkey, where binary gender roles are valid, gender identity structures are expected to include behavioral patterns accepted as appropriate to biological sex.

In future studies, demographically diverse sample groups should be created to fully analyse the society's perspective. Additionally, it would be beneficial to work with a high sample number to make better inferences. Researchers should develop new scales and research questions to determine the variables that will shape the current gender schemas of individuals and the perception of gender identities of individuals in other cultures.

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